AN INQUIRY INTO UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH:

A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective

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P.T. RAJU'S APPROACH TO THE REAL: A Relationalist Critique*

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P.T. Raju (1904-92)[1] has been widely known as a writer in comparative philosophy and a historian of Indian philosophy.[2] But his contribution as a critical, creative Neovedantin is yet to be given due attention in philosophical circles.

There are two distinct periods in Raju's philosophical thinking. In the pre-1962 period, Raju remained a faithful follower of his mentor S. Radhakrishnan, as far as his philosophical pursuits and writing style were concerned. But in the period after he moved to The College of Wooster, Ohio, in 1962, Raju worked out a reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta, using the concept of "I-am."[3]

Backed up by the insight of two scriptural passages where the Supreme Being has been described as I AM (*Brihadaranyaka*

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1 P.T. (Poolla Tirupati) Raju held teaching positions at Andhra University (1932-49), the University of Rajasthan (1949-62), and The College of Wooster, Ohio (1962-73). He continued at The College of Wooster as professor emeritus until his death in 1992.

2 Raju's *Introduction to Comparative Philosophy* (1962) and *Lectures on Comparative Philosophy* (1970) provided significant theoretical perspectives on comparative philosophy. And his *Idealistic Thought of India* (1953, 1973), *The Philosophical Traditions of India* (1971), and *Structural Depths of Indian Thought* (1985) made substantial contributions to the study of Indian philosophy.

3 As to Raju's philosophy of I-am, special mention may be made of his *Spirit, Being, and Self* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1982), *Structural Depths of Indian Thought* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1985), and "Transcendence and Historicity in the Self as *Atman*" (*Idealistic Studies* 20 [1990]: 203-29). For a detailed exposition of Raju's philosophy of I-am, see Joseph Kaipayil, *The Epistemology of Comparative Philosophy: A Critique with Reference to P.T. Raju's Views* (Rome: Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies, 1995), 67-90.

Upanishad 1.4.1; Ex 3:14),[4] Raju settled on the concept of "I-am" (*aham-asmi*) as the key to understanding Brahman and its relation to the world. In Raju, the question of the real boils down to the question of I-am and vice versa.

1. The Fundamentality of I-am Experience

Raju uses the lowercase "I-am" to refer to the individual, finite self (*atman*) and the uppercase "I-AM" to refer to the Supreme Self (*Atman*). Both the finite I-am and the infinite I-AM are characterized by self-consciousness. In I-am, the subject is aware of its own am-ness (existence). The term I-am, being the combination of a noun (I) and a verb (am), expresses the dynamic character of the self (*atman*) as well.

Raju believed that the idea of I-am has the potential to address the transcendence and immanence of Brahman and thus it remedies *Advaita's* alleged neglect of the world and the empirical self. To explain the transcendence and immanence of the self, Raju borrowed from Ramanuja's *Vishishtadvaita* the distinction between existential consciousness (*svarupa-jnana*) and phenomenological consciousness (*dharmabhuta-jnana*). The existential consciousness, which is self-awareness, is constitutive of the self. Whereas, the phenomenological consciousness is the self's awareness of the world, and it is attributive (predicative) of the self. The existential consciousness signifies the I-am (*sum*) and the phenomenological consciousness, the I-think (*cogito*). The former is transcendent and permanent, and the latter is empirical and passing.[5] Both are closely connected though. I-am is involved in I-think, as I-think is impossible without I-am.[6]

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[4] See *Spirit, Being, and Self*, 1, 3.

[5] The enduring I-am transcends the passing I-think.

[6] By analogy, the Supreme I-AM (*Atman*) is both immanent in and yet transcends the world.

As mentioned above, I-am (*sum*) is more fundamental than I-think (*cogito*), and the former precedes the latter.[7] No epistemological assertion does make any sense unless we assume the existence of a self-conscious subject, the I-am. When I say, "This is a rose," what it means is that I am conscious that this is a rose. In this regard it may be noted that, for Raju, it is not that I am becoming self-conscious through the perception of the rose, but it is my self-aware I-am that makes the perception of the rose possible. It is not the *cogito* that makes the *sum* possible, but the other way round. As an *Advaitin*, Raju wouldn't allow *cogito* (I-think) to determine sum (I-am). I-am, as the first-personal existence, implies awareness of its own am-ness (existence).

Without a dynamic I-am, I cannot understand the world. The structures of the world, such as time, space and causality, may be there objectively, but they cannot be intelligible without an enduring subject which organizes the diverse experiences into knowledge. I collect together past, present and future and postulate time; I locate things in the continuous passage of time and postulate space; and I correlate things and postulate causality. So it is not our experience of the world that gives certainty to the existence of I-am, but rather it is I-am that gives certainty to the existence of the world. In a sense, my I-am confers its own existence on the world.

2. From the Finite I-AM to the Supreme I-AM

From the fundamentality of I-am experience Raju moves on to the Supreme I-AM. The idea that the Supreme Being is a self-conscious subject is integral to Vedanta. If then, where does Raju's originality lie? Raju's originality consists in giving the Vedantic doctrine of the Spirit a philosophical foundation

[7] In I-think there exists a distinction between the subject (I) and the object (thought), while there is no such distinction in I-am, because I and am-ness are one. Also, Raju holds that the self's ontological consciousness is independent of its phenomenological consciousness.

in the human experience. Simply put, Raju grounded the philosophy of the Supreme I-AM on the philosophy of human I-am experience. Only after having demonstrated that the human being is essentially an I-am existence did Raju discuss the nature of *Brahman* as I-AM.

I don't have a direct experience and knowledge of the Supreme I-AM. What is accessible to me is only my first-personal experience of my I-am. The only being which I can grasp without doubt is my own I-am. Nonetheless, from this ontological experience of my finite I-am, I can postulate that the self-identity (*svarupa*) of *Brahman* is I-AM. If my existence is fundamentally an I-am existence and my basic experience is an I-am experience, the Supreme Being should also be essentially an I-AM existence and experience. My finite I-am is the true image of the Supreme I-AM.[8] The argument is based on (the principle of) unity of being.

First of all, Raju makes a distinction between classificatory (logical) being and ontological being. As a classificatory, universal term, being stands for all entities that exist. But as an ontological term, being denotes the being (is-ness) of those entities. While the classificatory being signifies a plurality of entities, the ontological being signifies only one thing, namely, the to-be of things. The ontological being is one and never a plurality. This one ontological being is the constitutive principle of all things. This is the basis of unity of being.

As a *Vedantin*, Raju identifies the one ontological being, which makes the unity of being possible, as the *Brahman* of the Upanishads. From *Brahman*, the Supreme I-AM, derives the being (existence) of both the finite I-am and the world. Because of the unity of being, all entities in their existence-aspect are of the same ontological status. In other words, as far as the being

[8] Perhaps the biblical and upanishadic concepts of the Supreme Being as I AM can join hands here, according to Raju. See *Spirit, Being, and Self*, 133.

(*satta*) aspect is concerned, the Supreme I-Am, the finite I-am and the world have the same ontological status. This is the non-dualism which *Advaita* speaks of, according to Raju.

Now coming to the *Advaitic* question of the identity between the Supreme I-AM and the finite I-am, Raju's answer is a qualified affirmation. Owing to the principle of unity of being, the two are ontologically one and the same. Since the ontological being cannot but be one, we need to accept that the individual I-am is inherently infinite and is essentially one with the Supreme I-AM.[9] The Supreme I-AM is present in me as my I-am, so much so that in my I-am I discover the ontological roots of the world. For Raju, it is the presence of the phenomenological self (I-think) in me that makes my individual I-am different from the Supreme I-AM. The finite I-am has the I-think as its embodiment, while the Supreme I-AM doesn't have such embodiment. So there is only a distinction but no separation between the two.

A related issue Raju raises is the personhood of *Brahman*. For fear of misrepresenting *Brahman* to be a particular person, one among many, Raju falls short of calling *Brahman* a person. But he concedes *Brahman* is of personal nature.[10] The Supreme I-AM, expressed and experienced essentially as my personal I-am, is "personal living consciousness, conscious of its being only."[11] As I-AM, *Brahman* is first-personal experience, self-conscious of its being.

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[9] Though the Supreme I-Am transcends my finite I-am, I can experience it only as my I-am. My I-am is the gateway to the Supreme I-AM. See *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, 457; *Spirit, Being, and Self*, 9; "Transcendence and Historicity in the Self as *Atman*," 216.

[10] The possibility of conceiving the Brahman of *Advaita* as personal and not as simply impersonal had already been suggested by T.M.P. Mahadevan. At a seminar on the concept of person organized at the University of Madras in 1973, he was reported to have observed, "If the Brahman of Shankara is anything, it is surely not impersonal." See R. de Smet, "Towards an Indian View of the Person," in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, ed. M. Chatterjee, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), 51.

[11] *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, 457.

3. From the Supreme I-AM to the World

To understand the world and its relation to the Supreme I-AM, Raju again uses the ontological-phenomenological distinction he found in Ramanuja. Phenomenologically the world is a plurality of entities. But the world has no independent ontological existence apart from that of the Supreme I-AM. Ontologically speaking, the being of a horse and my being are the same, though the horse and I are phenomenologically different. The one ontological being somehow diversifies itself into the manifold of things, without at the same time losing its own oneness. The Supreme I-AM is immanent in the world of becoming, yet transcends it, just as I-am is involved in I-think and yet transcending it. Becoming is the outward expressions of being; however, for every moment of becoming, being stands in its transcendence.

This world of becoming is not an illusion as many would suggest. Indeed for Raju, the term "*maya*" should be taken in its etymological meaning and rendered as the "measured," rather than "illusion." The term *maya* is derived from its verbal root *ma*, meaning to measure.[12] Hence by *maya* we mean to say the world is the measured (measured in time and space), in contrast with *Brahman* which is non-measured.

Raju also interpreted *maya* as the creative power (*shakti*) of *Brahman. Brahman* and its creative power are inseparable, just as burning power of fire has no independent existence other than that of fire. The world is the transformation of the creative energy of *Brahman*, rather than of *Brahman* itself.[13] The cosmos comes out of *Brahman* as the transformation of its inherent energy and is absorbed back to *Brahman* through the

[12] *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, 409, 413, 433 n. 66.
[13] *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, 517.

same energy. *Brahman* is immanent in the world through this creative power.[14]

The human subjectivity (I-am) and the cosmic objectivity (the world) are the two aspects or directions of the Supreme I-AM's self-manifestation.[15] As the ontological foundation of all that exists, the Supreme I-AM ontologically includes my subjective I-am and the objective world. By lying at its roots and supplying being (*satta*) to it, the Supreme I-AM includes the world in its own being (*satta*).

4. A Relationalist Critique of Raju's Approach to the Real

Relationalism, as I pursue it, is a theory about being.[16] To be is to be relational. Only that which is relational can claim to be real, because things are constituted by their multiple relationalities, both inter and intra. Relationality is a thing's ontological relatedness to its other, which makes that thing's existence and nature possible. Further for relationalism, the term being refers to that which exists in its relationality. What exists in relationality is a relational particular. So "being" is ultimately a relational particular. The relational particulars interact and make the network of things, which we call reality.

My overall perception of Raju's philosophy of I-am is that it cannot endorse a relationalist view of the real. The Supreme I-AM, which is the ultimate real, cannot be relational in the strict sense. The *Brahman* of *Advaita* is absolutely simple, devoid of all distinctions. As pure subsistent consciousness, there is

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[14] Raju spoke of three stages of the creative process, namely, Brahman in its creative form (*Ishvara*), subtle state of the world (*hiranyagarbha*), and gross form of the world (*virat*). See "Transcendence and Historicity in the Self as *Atman*," 210 ff.

[15] According to Raju, the highest form of the ontological being is the subjective I-am, in which I and am imply each other. See *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, xxiv; *Spirit, Being and Self*, 122.

[16] The ontological relationalism which I pursue is a theory of being that tries to account for the world in its unity and plurality. For more on it, see: J. Kaipayil, *An Essay on Ontology*, (Bangalore: JIP Publications, 2008); J. Kaipayil, *Relationalism: A Theory of Being,* (Bangalore: JIP Publications, 2009).

no distinction even between existence (*sat*) and consciousness (*chit*). The self-awareness of the I-am is not mediated through any sort of I-think. Owing to its ontological "simplicity," the ultimate reality remains utterly non-qualified and un-related.

With regard to the said notion of ontological simplicity, the relationalist view of reality stands at the other end of the spectrum. According to relationalism, there is no absolute simplicity for anything; everything remains qualified by its relational properties. Being is propertied relational particular. Relationality, the state of being related, is integral to reality; and relationality is the most important constitutive character of things.

Also on the ontological status of consciousness, relationalism begs to differ. Raju allows the I-am, particularly the Supreme I-AM, to be conceived as subsistent consciousness.[17] For relationalism, consciousness is a property of the subject. Consciousness is intentional, both ontologically and epistemologically. Consciousness is the intentional relationality that exists between the knowing subject and the known object. Even as the sum precedes the *cogito*, an entity's self-awareness as sum is always mediated through its *cogito*. The knower, the known and the knowledge are three interrelated essential terms involved in every epistemic situation.

Having said the above, I wouldn't interpret Raju's philosophy of I-am as robustly anti-relationalistic. His idea of unity of being is important for relationalism as well, despite the differences in how that concept is conceived. For Raju, the concept is ontological (existential), while for relationalism it is primarily classificatory (nominalistic).[18] But both agree that

[17] *Brahman* is consciousness, not that *Brahman* has consciousness. Lying beyond subject-object duality, *Brahman per se* is conscious of its being only and has no cognition of objects.

[18] According to Raju, unity of being is due to the one ontological being, the Supreme I-AM, in whose existence all existents are grounded. From the point of view of

without some sort of univocal view of being, metaphysics (ontology) as a unified discourse on being is impossible.

With regard to the need of a theoretical necessary being, I think Raju and I can greatly agree. The idea of an ontologically necessary being, the Supreme I-AM for Raju and Being-principle for me, can make the relationality of the world more intelligible.[19]

Despite his being an idealist and Advaitin, one can detect in Raju's approach to the real at least a weak form of relationalism. His insistence on transcendence and immanence of the Supreme I-AM, importance he accorded to the finite I-am, his reinterpretation of *maya* in order to positively accommodate the world in his metaphysics, his distinction between Brahman and its creative power, and his openness to some of Ramanuja's ideas are indicative of this.

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relationalism, what exists ultimately is not being but the relational particular; being is only a common term that is used to speak about the existent particulars.

[19] Unlike Raju's Supreme I-AM which is absolutely simple and undifferentiated, I have conceived of Being-principle in relationalist terms as a triadic unity of three primal principles - existence, intelligence, and force.